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ABSTRACT

The history of San Felipe School District (Texas), 1894-1971, depicts a situation in which Mexican Americans had control of local schools. Established in the Mexican "barrio" of the racially divided border town of Del Rio, San Felipe resisted annexation to the Anglo school district and became an independent school district in 1929. Mexican Americans made up the vast majority of the faculty, staff, and administration. Spanish was used extensively in and around the schools, and Mexican holidays were sometimes occasions for early dismissal. However, the more frequent use of Spanish was at the expense of English language skills. Students and employers alike complained about the poor English proficiency demonstrated by San Felipe graduates. Poverty made it difficult for the district to meet its financial obligations and nearly impossible to expand facilities to meet demand. Restructuring of statewide taxation and funding formulas for Texas schools under the 1949 Gilmer-Aiken Law exacerbated financial problems faced by San Felipe schools. The opening of Laughlin Air Force Base (LAFB) in the district in 1952 could have been the district's economic salvation, since federal funds were allocated locally based on numbers of students at the base. However, the predominately Anglo LAFB students transferred to the Anglo Del Rio district, causing a federal judge to view the situation as segregation and order the two school districts consolidated. (Contains 25 references) (Author/TD)

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THEY WERE "HAPPY TO ROCK ALONG IN THIS TREND," THE SAN FELIPE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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They Were "Happy to Rock Along in This Trend," The San Felipe Independent School District

For at least ten millennia the crystal clear waters of San Felipe Creek have attracted humans to the area now occupied by Del Rio, Texas. San Felipe Creek is both the major source of life-giving water for Del Rio, and line of demarcation down the middle of this community on the Texas – Mexico border. Most Anglos settled west of the creek, while most people of Mexican descent lived to the east. The outlines of segregation emerge early in the story and are clearly reflected in the creation of public school districts in the town of Del Rio.

In this divided border town, two public school districts emerged. On the west side of the creek was the Anglo dominated Del Rio school district. On the east side was the Mexican American controlled San Felipe school district. They remained separate political entities until the Fifth Circuit Court forced them to merge in 1971.

Most of the historical literature that deals with the relationship between Mexican Americans and the public schools focuses on the experiences of Mexican Americans in Anglo

controlled schools (e. g., Donato, 1997; Gonzalez, 1990; San Miguel, Jr., 1987). These works have created the foundation for understanding this topic. Exploring situations in which Mexican Americans controlled or had substantial influence upon their schools will bring added nuance to our knowledge. The San Felipe school district existed from 1894 to 1971 and provides a useful place to begin such an investigation.

People who have lived on the east side of the creek refer to this area as barrio San Felipe. For many years students on the east side of the creek attended parochial schools and small private Spanish language schools, called escualitas, often held in private residences. The quality of teaching, the curriculum, and the very existence of these schools were inconsistent at best, but during the late nineteenth century they provided the only formal education available to these children.

The ratification of an amendment to the state constitution in 1883, coupled with population growth and increasing interest in formal education, stimulated the creation of a more formalized system of education throughout the state. In 1883, the people of barrio San Felipe established a new, more permanent school. According to Gutierrez (1978), "it was a wooden frame building

with gabled roofs located on" (p. 18) Jones Street. The opening of this school signaled a turn in barrio San Felipe's educational development away from escualitas toward a permanent, bureaucratized system of public instruction.

In June 1884, the Kinney County Commissioners Court established countywide school district boundaries, including those for the San Felipe Common School District (SFCSD). The commissioners used natural boundaries and well-known landmarks to delimit the various districts in their county. As reported in a study by Barnett and Moore (1953), boundaries for the San Felipe District were the Old El Paso Road on the north, San Felipe Creek on the west, the Rio Grande on the south, and Sycamore Creek on the east (p. 47). These boundaries remained the same after the state created Val Verde County in 1885 (Gammel, 1898; Val Verde County Commissioners Court, 1885).

Official records do not state why Anglo political leaders of two counties chose San Felipe Creek as a dividing line between two school districts. Certainly as a natural boundary it was convenient, but other factors were probably at least as important. Although evidence is rather sparse, it seems that most residents of barrio San Felipe were of a lower economic status than people in

other parts of Del Rio. The earliest residents were laborers on the Losoya estate and other ranches and farms located west of the creek. It is also likely that most new arrivals from Mexico settled east of the creek. Whatever the official reason or reasons for using San Felipe Creek as a dividing line between school districts, the *San Antonio Weekly Express* reported that by 1883 Anglos viewed San Felipe as "the Mexican portion of the town." (as cited in *The Spirit of Val Verde*, 1985, p. 142).

The schools in the SFCSD continually felt the pressure of an increasing population. "Around 1907, the community had grown to such proportions that the old frame school house was no longer big enough to accommodate all of the children of school age. To help relieve overcrowding the building Club Amantes de la Libertad was being used as a school and so was another building located on Cantu Street" (Gutierrez, 1978, p. 21). Fully aware of the problem, County Judge, and therefore County School Board member, C. K. McDowell promised a new schoolhouse for San Felipe. The following year, a new stucco building replaced the antiquated and overcrowded old frame schoolhouse. According to Gutierrez (1978) "This new school was painted yellow and it became known as 'Escuela Amarilla'" (p. 21). Escuela Amarilla

filled to capacity almost immediately, so the county commissioners added another school to the district in 1910. The people of San Felipe called this school Calaveras, but it too was soon full to capacity. "The board then added a second story to the original school...in 1914" (Gutierrez, 1978; p. 28). One seemingly insurmountable problem that the San Felipe schools faced throughout their history was that the capacity of the facilities always lagged behind demand.

Also in 1914, a young boy named Gilberto Cerda entered the first grade in San Felipe. Looking back on his early experiences there, he recalled that there were twelve teachers in the public schools, four at Calaveras, eight at Central (Escuela Amarilla), and a total of four hundred students. Since San Felipe did not have a high school, Cerda transferred to the Del Rio district to continue his education (Cerda, 1937). He graduated as salutatorian in 1926, in a class in which "'[e]ight out of 54 graduates were Mexican American.'" ("Like the city," 1982).

Unlike Cerda, many students in San Felipe did not attend the public schools, but relied on the escualitas for their entire education. Cerda argued (1937) that these "[p]rivate Spanish schools were thriving" because "education in the English language

was considered a waste of time." Although overcrowding in the public schools probably influenced some parents to choose one of the private schools, Cerda identified what he believed were more compelling reasons for the parents in San Felipe to avoid sending their children to the public schools. He suggested that "[e]ither the American public schools were not being made interesting enough, or the people of the district did not yet fully understand the value of at least an elementary education in the English language." In spite of reluctance by some to embrace the public schools, the SFCSD could not expand capacity fast enough to accommodate all the students who desired a public school education.

Problems from Outside the District

Problems from outside the district also plagued the San Felipe schools. Some of these were the result of the discovery of Texas oil in 1901. By 1927 Del Rio "was becoming an important link in the chain of oil pipe lines from the West Texas Oil Fields to the Coast." One line connected the Yates Pool in Pecos County to tank farms located "three miles east of Del Rio" (Daughtry & Daughtry, 1982, p. 38). Being three miles east of the town of Del Rio meant that the these new facilities were squarely within the

boundaries of the SFCSD and that any taxes generated would go to the San Felipe schools.

Such revenue potential did not go unnoticed by school leaders on the west side of the creek, and they put their cross hairs directly on this financial plum. At its meeting in January 1928, the DRISD board asked the superintendent to learn what legal requirements had to be met in order to annex all or part of "the San Felipe Common School District to the Del Rio Independent School District" (The Inhabitants of the City of Del Rio Independent School District [DRISD], 1928, January 18). After determining what they thought was the proper procedure, the DRISD board decided to annex the northwestern quarter of the SFCSD, including the tank farm, all of barrio San Felipe and all of the San Felipe schools (Val Verde County Board of Trustees [VVCB], 1928, June 29). County officials approved the annexation, but people in barrio San Felipe were quick to object.

Meeting in special session late on June 29, the SFCSD board members decided that their response would be twofold, to seek immediate legal remedies and to devise a long-term strategy to prevent annexation. First they sought an injunction to prevent the DRISD from completing its annexation plan. According to

Peña (1951), "on July 19, 1928, Judge Joseph Jones ruled in favor of an injunction served against the Del Rio district prohibiting" (p. 21) the annexation. Despite objections from DRISD attorneys, Jones again upheld the injunction the following September. One of the primary flaws in the DRISD case was that district and county officials attempted the annexation "without the consent or desire of the legally qualified property tax paying voters" (Peña, p. 25) living in the affected area. Despite this defect, the DRISD appealed the ruling, but in November 1928, the Court of Civil Appeals in San Antonio upheld the decision in favor of San Felipe (*ISD v Lowe*, 1928). The courts stopped the immediate threat but provided no long-term protection for the San Felipe schools.

A New Independent School District

When the County Trustees approved the annexation of part of the San Felipe district, Santos S. Garza, Hernan Cadena and Andres Cortinas (members of the San Felipe School Board) began laying the groundwork for what they believed would be permanent protection for their schools. Immediately they began to look for support "to make the San Felipe Common School District...an independent school district" (Gutierrez, 1978, p. 29). Independence

would make the San Felipe schools politically co-equal to the DRISD and no longer subject to the Val Verde County Board of Trustees. Independent status would also allow the school board to impose higher tax rates than state law allowed for common school districts. Increased local control and growing tax revenues could help people in barrio San Felipe improve and expand their schools. Although independent status removed the threat of annexation by the DRISD, the protection of independence was short-lived.

The road to independence was clearly marked. First, voters in the district had to present a petition to the County Trustees asking for this change. Once county officials determined that the petition was valid, they would approve independent status as long as there were no legal reasons not to do so. The Trustees were then to order an election so the voters in the affected area could choose a new school board. Accordingly, Garza and other supporters of independence circulated such a petition in the SFCSD. At their regular meeting in July 1929, the County School Trustees found that more than two hundred "legally qualified property tax paying voters," a majority of the voters in SFCSD, had signed the petition, and that the petitioners had provided convincing evidence that the community would "be financially capable of maintaining high

school work at a reasonable cost per capita" (VVCB, 1929, July 27), as required by state law. With these legal obligations fulfilled, the County Trustees ordered an election to create the new independent district and to elect its new school board. The voters of San Felipe voted in favor of independence and the County Board officially recorded the establishment of the San Felipe Independent School District (SFISD) on September 7, 1929 (VVCB, 1929, September 29). Although the schools were now protected from annexation, much work remained to be done before they could provide the children of San Felipe with all the educational opportunity they needed.

A New High School for San Felipe

As stated above, one of the requirements for independence was to provide proof that the new district could provide "high school work at a reasonable cost," but San Felipe had no high school. Garza and the others had sold county officials on the potential to fulfill this part of the obligation. They now had to make potential become reality. After months of politicking throughout the district, the SFISD board called for a bond election to be held March 31, 1930 to raise money for a new high school.

The board's hard work paid off, for "not a single vote [was] cast against the issue" (Gutierrez, 1978, p. 29).

The new San Felipe High School (SFHS) officially opened on December 13, 1930 with what Gutierrez (1978) called "an impressive ceremony" (p. 28). Peña (1951) reported that there were three teachers assigned to the new school, T. C. Hickman, Edgar Huston, and Gilberto Cerda, to teach twenty-five students. In addition to these classroom teachers there was a physical education instructor, Joe F. Martinez, who wasted no time in creating the first football team in San Felipe. Nineteen boys tried out, even though "[m]ost of the parents did not approve, [sic] of what they called an extremely rough game" (pp. 101-102). The following spring SFHS held its first graduation ceremonies for a senior class of six (Peña, p. 44).

School administrators, faculty, and others in San Felipe were happy to see their dreams come to fruition. The creation of a high school was imperative for those who had fought for independent status, and the political unity in the election must have been gratifying to them. Having a complete school system would also mean that students in the San Felipe schools would no longer be dependent on Del Rio High School for their secondary

education. This sense of accomplishment and the usual rivalries between cross-town high schools in music, sports and other areas seems to have fostered a feeling of solidarity in barrio San Felipe and bolstered its sense of identity as unique from the rest of Del Rio. As these feelings became stronger over the years, they made a new generation of school leaders deeply committed to protecting their schools from any interference or outside threat. In the mean time, they concentrated on creating the best schools they possibly could.

Language and Culture in the San Felipe Schools

Parents in San Felipe valued Mexican culture and the replication of their own Mexican American culture. Spanish Club students from SFHS took field trips to Mexico as money permitted, but they also celebrated Mexican culture closer to home. Both school districts in Del Rio celebrated cinco de mayo and diez y seis de septiembre, but the San Felipe schools went so far as to declare a half-day school holiday on each date beginning in 1954 (SFISD, 1954, July 26). Insisting that the schools be partners with families in replicating Mexican American culture would eventually become a source of protracted conflict between the leaders of the two

school districts in Del Rio after the federal court forced them to merge in 1971.

Creating a new high school meant overcoming many obstacles, such as buying books and desks, hiring teachers and janitors, and organizing many other details. Helping students acquire English language skills proved to be one of the first and most long lasting obstacles faced by the SFISD. San Felipe High School principal, and later district Superintendent, Cerda (1937) recalled that even the process of gaining state accreditation was relatively easy, but learning "English...was proving difficult for our Spanish speaking students." Over the long term, getting students to be fluent in English proved to be one of the greatest challenges facing the district.

Language minority students have always presented a challenge to public schools. Even in the present, there is no consensus on how best to educate them. Some have advocated a method often called total immersion, in which language minority students are placed in an English only environment. Others support teaching English as a second language, wherein the school teaches subjects in the student's home language and teaches English as a separate subject. There are yet others who prefer a truly bilingual

system where students become fully literate in both languages. No widespread agreement has yet emerged, nor did it in Del Rio.

Since the residents of San Felipe were almost exclusively of Mexican descent, it would be natural to expect that Spanish would play a prominent role in everyday life and in school activities. Peña (1951) noted that prior to World War II, "Spanish was used at all public gatherings in San Felipe, and even the speeches delivered at the seventh grade graduations were in Spanish. The desire to learn the language of this country had not been instilled in [the people living in San Felipe], and many were happy to rock along in this trend" (p. 87).

Peña further argued that this began to change after the war. He stated (1951) that by 1951, "[m]any of the San Felipe six year old students...already speak English [when they enter school], a thing that was unheard of a few years ago" (p. 108). Once in school, the students were taught bilingually through the first three grades, as in the Del Rio schools, but beyond this point, the use of Spanish at school seems to have been more prevalent in the SFISD than in the DRISD (Sotelo, G., personal communication, 1998). Despite the improvement evident in entering first graders, poor

English language skills continued to be a problem for San Felipe High School graduates throughout the 1950s.

Some Curriculum Problems Identified

Peña's history of the San Felipe schools was not the only scholarly investigation of the district in the 1950s. Two other teachers, María Calderón and Marie Keller, looked more specifically at the curriculum and teaching in the schools, and the impact they had on students. The picture these studies create is one that reveals improvement in many ways, but that also shows some serious deficiencies.

María Elena Viniegra Calderón came to Del Rio from Mexico City with her family in 1929, when she was but one year old. Calderón graduated from SFHS in 1946 and earned a Bachelor of Business Administration from Sul Ross College in 1949. That same year, she returned to Del Rio and became a teacher in the Business Department at SFHS. She earned a Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Texas in 1956 (Calderón, 1956, p. 146). For her master's thesis Calderón conducted a study of twenty employers in Del Rio in order to

ascertain the usefulness of the business education provided by SFHS and to recommend changes to the curriculum.

Marie Rubio Keller wrote the second study. In an interview Keller stated ("Our mystery," 1985) that she was born in Uvalde, Texas, 1907. Three months after Maria's birth the family moved to Del Rio in search of more lucrative employment. When she was five years old, Maria began her formal education in the kindergarten that met in the Club Amantes de Libertad building across the street from East Side Elementary in the San Felipe district. Keller graduated from Del Rio High School in 1922, earned a teaching certificate during the summer, and began teaching at East Side Elementary (Calaveras) that fall. She married John W. Keller in 1931, earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Texas in 1947, a Master of Education from the same university in 1962, and finally retired from the San Felipe schools in 1971. Keller's master's thesis is a study to ascertain points of strength and weakness in the high school curriculum by examining the experiences of students who graduated from San Felipe High School in the late 1950s. Together, the Calderón and Keller studies present a less romantic picture of the San Felipe schools than does Peña's work, and they clearly state that the San

Felipe High School did not provide the level of education that employers and graduates thought it should.

Calderón surveyed twenty local businesses to determine what prospective employers looked for in employees and to look for ways to improve the business curriculum in the high school. English language skills are a prominent topic throughout the work. When asked if they would hire Spanish speakers as readily as English speakers, seventy percent responded in the affirmative. But as one employer went on to point out, they sought applicants with the "best and most fluent command of the English language," something he had "not had occasion to find…except in a very few cases" (Calderón, 1956, p. 73). Survey respondents cited poor educational qualifications, including English skills, as the greatest deficiency of job applicants, second only to personal appearance. Even more telling is the fact that when asked to suggest improvements to the curriculum, seventy percent said that better English skills should be the top priority, especially in terms of "correct grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and capitalization" (p. 116).

After pouring over the details of the surveys, Calderón (1956) formulated eighteen recommendations for improving the

curriculum. English language skills are specifically mentioned in four of the recommendations. Calderón left no doubt about how much importance she and the surveyed employers placed on these skills when she stated that "students from San Felipe High School should and must master the English language in order to find a job and hold it" (p. 74).

Keller's (1962) study of SFHS graduates supports Calderón's findings. One hundred seventy-seven people participated in Keller's survey, and English language skills dominate their responses. When asked to list the most valuable subjects studied in high school, more than 30% chose English and Speech. Math and Commercial Subjects were the only other choices mentioned by more than 9% of the respondents. Slightly more than 2% mentioned Spanish as a valuable subject. Keller also asked those being surveyed to identify the least valuable subject they studied in high school. Spanish ranked third at slightly more than 14%, bested only by Social Studies (33%) and the Sciences (22%). As a least valuable subject, English and Speech could only muster a mere 2% (p. 47).

Keller (1962) also asked that respondents suggest improvements for the school. She notes that "[t]here were repeated

pleas for the enforcement of the [sic] spoken English in and[,] if possible[,] out of school, too...Over and over they [pleaded] that Speech should be made a required course," and that spelling should be offered as a separate course (p. 84).

Even more telling are the specific comments made by respondents (Keller, 1962):

> English speaking should be enforced at all times.
>
> Make training aids available to teachers, it help the students more. A student can learn more from a picture than from words.
>
> I find that I know a lot more in general than most of the men I have come in contact with but I can't make myself talk and tell my opinions. Mostly I feel self-conscious because I still require the speaking ability.
>
> Teachers should speak English all the time. (pp. 85-88)

Together, the studies of Calderón and Keller demonstrate that employers, students, and at least two teachers felt that the San Felipe schools were not doing enough to insure that graduates of the system left with sufficient communication skills. These studies suggest that most students came to school with little or no knowledge of English, and that the use of Spanish remained prevalent at school. Most of the students in Keller's survey felt that the schools had been remiss in their duties regarding the teaching

of English. However, this did not prevent a significant number of students from attending a college or university. San Felipe graduates like Calderón, Keller and Peña had to overcome many obstacles to attain their educational achievements, not the least of which was a constantly overcrowded and impoverished school district.

Economic Problems Plague the District

The people of San Felipe were on the whole impoverished people, but the poverty in San Felipe was not just an individual poverty; it was also the poverty of an independent school district, a school district too poor to provide the buildings necessary to educate all the children living there. Crowded schools exacerbated the frustrations of poverty at home and of learning English, thereby creating conditions that were not conducive to effective education. The poverty of the school district ultimately became another weapon in the arsenal against the SFISD, for it was a fight over federal school funds that brought an end to the independence of the San Felipe schools in 1971.

It is interesting to note that in no instance did any student, employer, or the authors of the Calderón, Keller, and Peña studies

suggest that a lack of money in the school district was a serious problem, or that more funds would have improved the situation. However, widening the field of view beyond San Felipe reveals the depth of the economic problems these schools faced.

According to the Department of Education (1930), of the 3,854 scholastics reported in Val Verde County in the fall of 1930, 1,901 lived in the Del Rio district, and 1,621 lived in the San Felipe district. However, the assessed valuation of property in the two districts was not nearly so equal. The value of taxable property in the (much smaller) Del Rio district was slightly more than $6.3 million, while in San Felipe it was $1.2 million, including the petroleum pumping station previously mentioned and an oil storage tank farm.

Severe storms destroyed the tank farm in the early 1930s and left the San Felipe schools in even worse financial shape. Property values in all school districts in Val Verde County declined during the 1930s, but between November 1934 and November 1936 property value in the SFISD dropped dramatically. Assessed valuation in the DRISD declined from $5.2 million to $5.1 million (about two percent), while during the same period valuation in SFISD crashed from $1 million to

$773,000 (almost twenty-three percent) (Department of Education, 1930, p. 85; 1936, p. 103). Since state law put an upper limit on tax rates, this devaluation had a direct impact on the school district.

Nonetheless, school had to continue and there were many students not being served. To address this problem, the district added four rooms to Calaveras in 1938, to accommodate more first and second graders (Peña, 1951, p. 106). Peña stated that during the 1939-40 school year, the PTA at Calaveras began construction of a meeting hall for their group. The ground floor of the two-story structure became three classrooms to help "relieve over crowding" in the school (p. 103). Even so, overcrowding was a constant companion of the San Felipe schools.

A portion of the overcrowding can be attributed to a particular group of students who lived outside the district. An undisclosed number of children from Villa Acuña came across the Rio Grande every day to attend school in the SFISD. Since these students lived outside the district, they could not be counted among the scholastic population so the state did not figure them in when distributing state per capita funds to the district. Also, the parents of these children paid no taxes to the district. This meant that prior to the restructuring of state funding in 1949, the SFISD did not

receive any state or local tax funds for these students. Beginning in 1939 the school board required that "children coming from Villa Acuña...be charged tuition" (SFISD, 1939, August 21) to attend school in San Felipe. But in the summer of 1949 voters in Texas passed the Gilmer - Aiken Law that fundamentally restructured how state school funds were collected and redistributed. The new law also exacerbated economic problems in the SFISD.

The Impact of Gilmer – Aiken on the San Felipe Schools

In 1949, the SFISD's funding problems came to the fore once again as a result of the Gilmer - Aiken Law. Prior to the passage of this law, the state distributed school funds based on scholastic population, that is, the number of school-age children living in the district "without reference to school attendance" (Still, 1950, p. 12). Gilmer - Aiken based allotment on "the average daily attendance for the district for the next preceding school year" (State of Texas, 1949, p. 11). Since the SFISD was not schooling a significant percent of its scholastic population, Gilmer - Aiken resulted in a dramatic decrease in state funds, making it even more difficult for San Felipe to expand, or even maintain, its school facilities.

Lawmakers also devised an incredibly complicated formula to determine exactly how much money each school district would pay to the state to help fund Gilmer - Aiken. The formula included the assessed value of real estate in the county, the income of the county, the scholastic population of the county, and the total estimated wealth of the county, meaning that the state collected funds based on the wealth and scholastic population of the county, but redistributed them based on the average daily attendance of each school district. This meant that the great wealth of the DRISD caused the SFISD to pay a much larger portion than would have been the case if the formula had been applied to each individual school district rather than to the whole county.

The impact of these various economic stumbling blocks can be seen in the building programs of the two districts. Including the new high school in built in 1930; San Felipe had only four schoolhouses by 1948, while the DRISD had grown from four school buildings in 1925 to six in 1948. San Felipe would not be able to add a fifth building until 1958, and the school board did not make the final payment on the high school in that district until December 1969.

The Federal Government Gets Involved

In May 1952 the United States Air Force reactivated a dormant air base just east of the town of Del Rio. Prewitt (2000) has traced the complex relationship between the base and the two school districts in Del Rio. Most of the personnel stationed at Laughlin Air Force Base (LAFB) were Anglos who initially lived in Del Rio. Even after the construction of on base housing in 1962, these families continued to send their children to schools in the DRISD. Along with the children came large sums of federal money to pay for their education. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the DRISD expanded its facilities while the San Felipe schools remained very overcrowded and unable to finance any major expansion. Leaders in the SFISD were convinced that Laughlin students and their federal funds rightfully belonged to the SFISD, but despite their best efforts, there seemed to be no legal way to change the situation.

The transferring of around one thousand Anglo students out of the predominantly Mexican American SFISD finally came to the notice of federal judge William Wayne Justice in 1970. Justice was hearing a case that had begun as an effort to end the segregation of African American students in the schools of Texas.

During the course of the trial, Justice expanded the scope of the case to include Mexican American students. What he saw in San Felipe was a poor segregated school system. Viewing this situation as little different from the segregation faced by African American students, Justice (*US v. Texas*, 1971) ordered that this practice of segregation in Del Rio end by consolidating the two school districts there.

Concluding Remarks

Community leaders in barrio San Felipe strove to create a system of public schools that would remain under Mexican American control. They believed that annexation to the DRISD would be an impediment to this dream, so they convinced a majority of voters in the San Felipe Common School District to vote for independent status. A part of their vision was their hope that the schools would reinforce Mexican American culture. To this end, Mexican Americans made up the vast majority of the faculty, staff, and administration. Spanish was used extensively in and around the schools, and Mexican holidays were sometimes occasions for releasing students early from school. However, the more frequent use of Spanish may have been at the expense of

English language skills. Students and employers alike complained about the poor English proficiency demonstrated by graduates of the system. Poverty made it difficult for the district to meet its financial obligations and made it nearly impossible to expand facilities enough to meet demand. Restructuring of the public school system under the Gilmer - Aiken Law merely exacerbated financial problems faced by the San Felipe schools. But in 1952, what must have seemed like manna from heaven dropped into the San Felipe district. The opening of LAFB could have been the economic salvation the SFISD so desperately needed, but it turned out to be the instrument of its destruction.

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